

Impure Animals At the UNAM Interview with José Luis Cuevas

Víctor Hugo Vizzuetti*



Elsie Montiel

▲ *Impure Animal IV*, 4.50 x 1.00 x 1.00 m, 2001 (bronze).



▲ *Impure Animal VII*, 2.50 x 2.40 x .83 m, 2001 (bronze).

For several months 12 “impure animals” reflecting the transfiguration of the imagination of an artist whose works always pose questions for their viewers invaded the vast central esplanade of Mexico’s University City. These beasts were loosed upon us by José Luis Cuevas, one of the most controversial Mexican artists to emerge from the twentieth century. They seized the opportunity to take command of the space provided for them, thereby also transforming our vision of the university’s gardens and buildings.

These “impure animals” were inspired in writings by the Spanish poet José Miguel Ullán, but their development and interpretation reflect essential aspects of the work of José Luis Cuevas, whose art has its origin in decisive influences like his reading of Kafka. “These impure animals in some way are characters undergoing a metamorphosis, and in that sense I would say that they reflect a close relationship to the work of Kafka.”¹ The intimate relationship between Cuevas and these imaginary beings thus evolved on the basis of a metamorphosis that ends up exposing everything that is impure in a human being, and which, upon being revealed, impels viewers to reflect upon their own transformations.

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▲ *Impure Animal XVIII*, 3.00 x 3.00 x 1.00 m, 2001 (bronze).

“If we accept that in a certain sense human beings are also animals, then these sculptures reflect an impurity that has a human origin.”

“I was in Seville preparing an exhibit of my work. Ullán came to visit me and shared some 20 poems on this theme of impure animals. The title was the first thing that attracted me. In fact I confessed this to him immediately. I told him that although I hadn’t read his poems yet, their title was already beginning to inspire me to create sculptures and engravings.”

Later the idea of animals as impure beings emerged. “I told José Maria that I definitely did not think that there could be impurity in animals, and he responded that it would be better if I read the poems, because the debate about whether or not animals could be impure was a separate matter.”

Cuevas did not change his opinion about this, but was able to incorporate the theme of animal essence in his creative process: “If we accept that in a certain sense human beings are also animals, then these sculptures reflect an impurity that has a human origin. Between any animal and the human animal there are differences. An example of this is eroticism, which does not exist in animals. They have the instinct which drives them to reproduce, while eroticism is something unique to humans, the result of other kinds of relationships rooted in the imagination.”

Thanks to a close, longstanding relationship with the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Cuevas



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▲ *Impure Animal VIII*, 3.00 x 1.40 x .40 m, 2001 (bronze).



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▲ *Impure Animal XV*, 2.50 x 2.20 x 1.30 m, 2001 (bronze).

agreed to exhibit his pieces in the space proposed by the university, where they remained from August 2005 until April 2006.² “The space they proposed struck me as splendid. Although the exhibit had already opened, the UNAM s rector agreed to another inauguration with my presence. I have a close relationship with the UNAM, not because I studied there, but ever since a retrospective exhibition of my work was held at the Museum of Architecture, which is almost exactly across from where these pieces were mounted. The retrospective was called ‘Weight, Stature and Color’ and was inaugurated in the early 1970s... Since then I have given talks in virtually all of the university’s schools.”

José Luis Cuevas is always willing to speak freely regarding his artistic work, to share his experiences and approach to life and art. As a self-taught artist, he understands the difficulties of independently learning the activities and details of artistic work without the guidance of a teacher passing on the secrets of his craft. Nonetheless experience taught him to disdain teachers who seek to influence their students, thereby preventing them from developing their own path of artistic creativity. “It is problematic to be self-taught, because you have to learn on your own. This is more difficult than it is to study in an academy where you learn the technical side of things. But on the other hand, by being on your own you can avoid something terrible that happens to art students: bearing the mark of the influence of some teachers who are actually

quite mediocre artists. If you are self-taught as I am, you alone have invented a world or several worlds.”

José Luis Cuevas accepts the fact that his work tends to provoke those who see it, although he also knows that as an artist and creator he can fully live out the process of creation of a work of art but not the effect it produces in others. Among his numerous experiences in this regard, he recalls one in particular which took place during his first exhibition in Washington, D.C., at the site of what is now the headquarters of the Organization of American States. The exhibition was structured around the theme of madness, and every day a certain man would visit it. Cuevas became curious, wanting to understand the motives behind this obsession.

“I remember that the people who worked there talked about a man who would linger for long periods looking at my sculptures. They had already labeled him the ‘crazy man’; he was a clerk at the Library of Congress. And yes, every day when he left work, he would go directly to the exhibition when it was about to close for the night. I decided to surprise him one day, because, before, he would leave as soon as he noticed I was there. But this time I did not give him enough time to leave, and when I spoke to him, he became very tense because I was the creator of all these horrors. I told him that it was a source of great satisfaction to me that he admired my work, and his response was that it was terrible that the exhibition was ending the next



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▲ *The Sculptress*, 2.75 x 1.75 x 1.70 m, 2001 (bronze).

day. Then I asked him not to run away from me the next day because I had a gift for him. When I got to my room, I made a drawing for him, and when he asked me what I had for him, I told him that it was something to remind him of me. He said nothing but, 'It's not possible, it is really wonderful!' He grabbed the file, looked at the drawing, and ran off, without saying goodbye or thanking me; he just ran."

José Luis Cuevas, painter, engraver and sculptor, had his international debut at a very early age with exhibitions in Washington in 1954, in Paris in 1955 and in New York in 1957. His career includes individual and group exhibitions in the main cities of the world, and in galleries, museums and art shows. His work has earned him numerous awards and honors such as the International Drawing Award accorded to him at the Fifth Biennial in Sao Paulo; the international engraving award at the Triennial in New Delhi in 1968; Mexico's National Prize for Sciences and the Arts in 1981; and the International Prize of the World Council of Engraving in San Francisco in 1984. In 1991, the French government awarded him membership in the Order of Arts and Letters, and in 1993 he was named an Emeritus Creator in Mexico.

He is recognized internationally as a key originator of the neo-figurative rebellion and in Mexico, his artistic insurgency led him to confront the defenders of so-called social realism. His dedication to drawing and engraving and his controversial, very personal ap-

proach to being an artist helped nourish the "Cuevas myth" and led to his decision to exile himself in France, after deciding that he was sadly misunderstood in his own homeland.

Despite his lengthy career, Cuevas acknowledges that when he enters his studio, he is afraid that he has lost his artistic ability. As he confronts a large blank sheet of paper, he is still haunted by doubts as he engages in the conflict of trying to reflect his ideas on paper and begins to create once more. His emotions seep through his drawings as he transforms his own image and struggles to reflect his changing emotions; this is why his studio is full of mirrors, since they help him find a reason to begin another day of artistic labor beyond the limits of his own insecurity and to transcend the fear of failure that might otherwise paralyze his efforts. Nonetheless, as he plunges directly into the process of artistic creation, all of his doubts disappear. His mind is flooded by images and characters, beings he will not let loose until the final instant when they emerge and are projected beyond him in a finished work. It is only then that he captures a glimmer of the next drawing and becomes certain that his artistic labor is unending.

As he comes to this point Cuevas recognizes that he is transformed by his work, in the same way that Kafka's characters go through a metamorphosis. Kafka is a recurrent influence in his art that goes all the way back to his illustration of his first book in 1957.

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▲ *Impure Animal VI*, 2.50 x 1.90 x 1.90 m, 2001 (bronze).

"It was an interpretation of Franz Kafka, which is also related to the themes of my work. It was the first book I illustrated, published in Philadelphia, where I made the engravings, and later distributed by Wittemberg in New York. The owner of the studio where I made the engravings had everything ready for the moment when my inspiration hit. I had read everything by Kafka before I arrived in Philadelphia: *The Castle*, *Amerika*, stories, letters, *The Metamorphosis*, etc. I had made interpretations of all of his books; this is why the book was called *The Worlds of Kafka and Cuevas*. I needed Max Brod's authorization to do this; he was Kafka's friend to whom we owe the publication of his works, since Kafka did not publish any of his books himself." José Luis Cuevas obtained Max Brod's permission to publish these illustrations due to his wide ranging knowledge of Kafka's work.

But not everything could be illustrated by Cuevas. He recalls when he was called by Sydney Shiff, of the Limited Editions Club, to illustrate *The Voices of Marrakesh* by Elias Canetti. "He told me, 'Listen, we have Canetti, who was just awarded the Nobel Prize; it's a book of stories about Marrakesh.' The next day I told him that I could not illustrate Canetti. He asked me if the problem was that he didn't interest me. I said yes, I was interested in reading it, not in illustrating it. He asked me why, and I told him that the book was full of donkeys and camels and I'd never drawn either one, so we forgot about Elias Canetti."

In the end, Cuevas illustrated Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for Shiff. But there was a limitation to what he could do on this project: he was not allowed to draw a cockroach, the key character in the story. "So I said to him, 'But Mr. Shiff, how can this be? The whole story revolves around the fact that Gregory Samsa is transformed into an insect. What do I draw,



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then?’” Cuevas believes that the reason for this limitation is religious, that it is unacceptable for a Jew to represent a human being as an insect. “I took the book and reread the first few lines. Remember? The ones that begin ‘After a restless night, Gregory Samsa woke up and discovered that he had been transformed into a monstrous insect.’ So I said to myself, what can I do? And I thought, well those first three lines are the ones I am going to illustrate: what happens to someone who is undergoing a metamorphosis and still does not understand what is happening to him. Somebody who goes through something like that must have had the most terrible nightmare. In this way I illustrated what Kafka had not written: the images of Gregory’s nightmare. I was not able to resist drawing a cockroach; Shiff approved all of the drawings except that one.”

Finally the artist returns us to the present, to the reality of his “Impure Animals,” but now we understand them more deeply, because now we know that before emerging they have suffered through a cycle of terrible premonitory dreams, and that in their unending metamorphosis, they are here to remind us of our own transfigurations and of everything that is impure within us, the human animals. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ All of the quotes are from a personal interview with José Luis Cuevas on June 19, 2006.
- ² Before arriving at the UNAM, Cuevas’s “Impure Animals” were exhibited in Madrid, along Mexico City’s Paseo de la Reforma, the Calzada de la Virgen in Morelia, Michoacán, the city of Toluca, the International Cervantino Festival in Guanajuato, the Festival de las Almas in Valle de Bravo, Querétaro’s Plaza de Armas, and the National Polytechnical Institute, also in Mexico City.



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▲ *Impure Animal VII*, 2.50 x 2.40 x .83 m, 2001 (bronze).